

December 5, 1955

Professor Louis Kaplan  
University Library

Dear Lou:

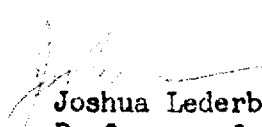
I am prompted to write by the brochure on Books, Science and Technology. Please consider my remarks as coming from the Devil's Advocate, as I consider myself as sentimental a bibliophile as anyone.

My concern is for the scholarly justification of the purchase of rare books. Why, as scholars, are we particularly interested in the particular examples of the printer's art represented by first editions? Why should the university bid high prices for books which bear personal inscriptions? It is easy to understand the necessity for authentic editions for the preparation of republications. But for any work that scholars are likely to do at Wisconsin, is a first edition of Newton more useful than a second? Can it possibly serve any purpose that a microfilm copy would not?

The prices of rare books are set in a market frequented by individuals (like myself, if I had the resources) who attach sentimental or curiosity values on unique editions, on irreproducible single objects of art. If an indefinite number of copies were available, the corresponding prices would be nominal. But is the university interested in the paper or ink of an old book, or in the ideas it represents, which have been shared by the whole world. Should the university compete in a market for old books against private collectors who hardly give a scholarly justification to their expensive hobbies?

I find it difficult to write in this vein, as I share the sentimentalities which I deplore. But I would face the problem of conscientiously justifying this kind of book purchase, in place, say, of expanding facilities for the use of microfilms and microcards. How would you go about it?

Yours sincerely,

  
Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics